

COVID-19 in numbers:

Ukraine

Cases: 2,247,419

Deaths: 52,811

Recovered:
2,183,642

Worldwide

Cases: 193,733,020

Deaths: 4,156,138

Recovered:
175,921,570

Zelensky meets Merkel in Berlin, gets no security guarantees

By Oleksiy Sorokin. Published July 12. Updated July 12 at 11:22 pm



 President Volodymyr Zelensky speaks to the press during a joint press conference held with German Chancellor Angela Merkel on July 12, 2021, in Berlin.

Photo by president.gov.ua

President Volodymyr Zelensky concluded his two-day trip to Berlin on July 12 with an official dinner hosted by German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Zelensky had a lot on his plate. The Ukrainian president came to Berlin as a last-minute attempt to stop the construction of the Russian Nord Stream 2 pipeline project and to secure German arms shipment to Ukraine.

Both tasks never made it to the table, with Zelensky's visit having a high status, yet little substance. Ukraine was promised 1.5 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines and zero promises of political or economic support.

After the U.S. lifted sanctions imposed on Nord Stream 2, the \$11 billion gas pipeline is expected to be commissioned in late August. As a result, Ukraine is expected to lose billions of dollars and the last obstacle to a full-scale Russian invasion will effectively evaporate.

"Nord Stream 2 is a huge security threat that is masked as an economic project," said Zelensky during his joint press conference with Merkel.

"We guarantee that Ukraine will maintain its status as a gas transit country," said Merkel without actually providing any guarantees.

Merkel is expected to meet with U.S. President Joseph Biden on July 15 in Washington to seal the completion of Nord Stream 2.

Meanwhile, the question of arms shipments to Ukraine never came up. The meeting between

Zelensky and Defense Minister Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer was canceled hours prior.

No official explanation was given, yet top German officials have already been outspoken on the issue – German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said in June that Ukraine won't get arms from Germany.

Ukraine was also told to comply with the Minsk peace agreements and asked to adopt the so-called "Steinmeier Formula," once a key proposal for ending Russia's war in eastern Ukraine that has largely been abandoned.

Shallow trip

Although Zelensky's two-day trip to Germany was packed with meetings, none of them appeared to be particularly impactful.

The president's first meeting was with Armin Laschet, the leader of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), on July 11. The next day, Zelensky met with Merkel and German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier.

"It is important for Ukraine that the next government continues its policy of supporting Ukraine in restoring its sovereignty and territorial integrity," Zelensky told Laschet, who is expected to succeed Merkel after the September federal election.

The meeting with Laschet, who is also the minister-president of North Rhine-Westphalia, was Zelensky's first head-to-head meeting with

Germany's potential future chancellor. In a recent poll by the Bild newspaper, the CDU was polling first with 27% of the vote.

Laschet has previously made comments that weren't received well in Ukraine. Laschet is a proponent of the Nord Stream 2 pipeline and has been vocal on the expansion of business and economic ties between Germany and Russia.

Zelensky later met with Kramp-Karrenbauer in an attempt to persuade the German side to expand military cooperation with Ukraine and test the waters on potential military shipments to Ukraine.

Yet German top officials showed no interest in shipping arms to Ukraine, a country that has lost 13,000 people due to the Russian intervention.

Meanwhile, Zelensky's meeting with Steinmeier focused on Ukraine's aspirations to join the European Union and NATO and the necessary reforms Ukraine must undergo in order to do so.

According to the President Office's press release, "Steinmeier stressed that (Ukraine's new anti-oligarch law) should provide more transparency and improve the business climate in Ukraine so that German entrepreneurs will be more interested in investing in Ukraine."

The law was passed by the Ukrainian parliament on July 1, in the first reading. For the first time, the draft law introduces a legal definition of what an oligarch is and imposes limits on what they're allowed to do.

Oligarchs would be banned from donating directly or indirectly to political parties and participating in the privatization of state assets.

Merkel's pipeline

The main event of Zelensky's visit to Berlin was his dinner with Merkel. The topics included Russia's ongoing war in Donbas, the question of Crimea, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the Nord Stream 2 pipeline.

The meeting between the two leaders came weeks after Merkel drew criticism for proposing an EU summit with Russia for the first time since Russia invaded Ukraine in 2014.

The idea was eventually scrapped due to strong opposition from several EU member states.

"Russia continues to hold troops on Ukraine's borders," said Zelensky during a joint press conference before the dinner with Merkel. Zelensky also mentioned that Russia continues to occupy parts of Donbas and Crimea.

As usual, Merkel expressed support for Ukraine's territorial integrity and reaffirmed German's commitment to the Minsk peace process. Merkel also noted that Ukraine must insert the so-called "Steinmeier formula" into the country's legislation.

The formula is a long-forgotten agreement that envisages that the occupied areas of eastern Ukraine get a special self-governing status after they hold local elections. The elections have to

take place in accordance with the Ukrainian legislation and be approved by the OSCE.

A key condition for the elections to take place is for the Russian forces and Russian-backed militants to leave the territory and for Ukraine to regain control over the eastern border with Russia, Zelensky said in October 2019, when the formula was last publicly mentioned by the president.

“Only Russia hasn’t moved forward with the Minsk agreements,” Zelensky said on July 12.

Meanwhile, the Russian Nord Stream 2 megaproject was by far the most controversial question on the list.

When it becomes operational, the \$11 billion project will double the capacity of the existing pipeline under the Baltic Sea — enabling 110 billion cubic meters of natural gas to be transported directly from Russia to Germany.

It bypasses Ukraine, which has only a five-year contract ending in 2024 for Russia to transport at least 40 billion cubic meters of gas for transit fees of at least \$7 billion.

Ukraine also fears that after Russia will stop using Ukraine’s pipelines, a deeper Russian military invasion is more likely. Many in Europe are also worried that the pipeline will increase the Kremlin’s influence on the continent’s energy sector.

"Today, Ukrainian gas transportation is a serious deterrent, the competition of Nord Stream 2 carries, we think, potential dangers to security in the region," said Zelensky. "As proof, we can see the large concentration of Russian military at Ukrainian borders. This concentration of arms is kept high as the withdrawal of troops was practically nonexistent."

In early April, Russia began drawing troops to Ukrainian borders. The country also increased its occupation force in Crimea. At its peak, there were 110,000 Russian soldiers situated near Ukrainian defense lines. Despite **officially claiming** the withdrawal of troops, Russia has only removed a fraction of that sum.

Despite this show of force, Merkel seems unbothered.

"I understand Ukraine's concerns, if you asked me ten years ago if I thought Russia would support separatists I wouldn't have believed that, said Merkel. "Russia has always neglected agreements," said Merkel, adding that Germany will provide new guarantees.

On July 11, Nord Stream 2 project head Matthias Waring told German publication Handelsblatt that they expect the construction work to be completed by the **end of August**.

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